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ABSTRACT

The use of an electoral college simulation model by college students is described. At least 16 students should participate to represent four geographical regions: the Northeast, the South, the Midwest, and the West. The electoral college simulation is most relevant in courses on American politics, the United States presidency, and elections. Although its applications have been future-oriented, history professors could use it to replicate specific previous national elections. Ways in which the simulation employs the teaching/learning approach include role playing and decision-making. For 1980 and 1984 simulations, the 20-question debriefing questionnaire gives hints about what occurred in the learning process. Three operational innovations in 1984 were: (1) a bi-state process (using colleges in Indiana and Kentucky); (2) an election cycle process (occurring in April, July, and October); and (3) a ballot process (drawing students from nonpolitical science courses). The projected methodology for 1988 is to select 102 colleges and universities (two for each state and Washington, DC) to participate during each of the three election seasons. (SW)

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THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE IN 1988: A MODEL FOR NATIONWIDE CAMPUS SIMULATIONS

by

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The Electoral College in the Curriculum

One of the reasons for focus on the Electoral College is its unique character. No other institution of American government weaves federal strands together so effectively. State conventions (Geib, 1985: 159) and political committees, for the most part, select electors, who are certificated by the Governors (Peirce and Longley, 1981:93,102). One of the six certificates signed by electors must be delivered to the judge of the U.S. District Court for that city (Peirce and Longley: 270-271). Then the U.S. Congress counts ballots, which determine who shall serve as President and Vice-President. These features alone, reflecting involvement of state government and all three branches of the national government, guarantee that every student of U.S. politics and U.S. history is expected to know something about the Electoral College.

There are power relationships that enhance human interest in the College. This is evident, e.g., in relation to hairbreadth elections and faithless electors. A hairbreadth election is an election subject to changed outcome with shifts of below one percent of the national vote (Peirce and Longley:259). There have been 22 hairbreadth elections from 1828 to 1984, accounting for 55% of the total. Vote shifts in a few states could have resulted in deadlock or in election of the other candidate.

The faithless elector phenomenon has been less significant, yet reflects the possibility for individualism in the College. In eight elections, individual electors have chosen to select another candidate: twice out of eight elections between 1789 and 1820 and six times out of eight elections between 1948 and 1976 (extrapolated from

Peirce and Longley: 97-98).

Since the College does not provide for equal representation, it has intrigued mathematical and political theorists. Mann and Shapley concluded from a game theoretic exercise (Mann and Shapley, 1964) that there is a pivotal power advantage for the large states. Stephen Brams got more specific, using a weighted 3/2's allocation rule. By cubing electoral representations and dividing each by its square root,[1] Brams was able to identify the nine most populous states as those most powerful in the College (Brams, 1978: 106-107).

Once these built-in biases are recognized, reformers bring forth their plans. An intriguing study of regional biases (Yunker and Longley, 1976) concludes that the East and Far West are most advantaged by the present system. In contrast, the eight Mountain states would benefit from the proportional plan (comparable to proportional representation), the South would gain most from the district plan (declaring a separate winner for each Congressional district), and the Midwest should prefer a direct vote (Yunker and Longley: 41, 44).

The Simulation Model

When I first conducted the Electoral College simulation in 1980,[2] the vote totals were based on the 1970 census. The 1984 simulations reflected changes from the 1980 census: eleven states gained electoral votes and eleven states lost electoral votes. The 1988 simulations will use the same state by state totals, which include seven entities with only three electoral votes.

Our simulation design is purposely easy to use, without a need for computer literacy. At least sixteen students should participate to represent four geographical regions: the Northeast, the South, the

Midwest, and the West. Pieces of paper are placed upside down in a box, with as many pieces as there are students. Each region has an equal number of pieces and one piece of paper has "Vice-President" on it.

Participants draw a piece to find their roles. They then assemble in four corners representing the regional groups. This is the place for flexibility. If a professor wants to deal with the subject quickly, it can be completed within fifty minutes, although feedback discussion would take place at another time. In contrast, if the professor wants more extensive treatment, it can be extended to one week or two weeks. The major opportunity for extension derives from discussion of pertinent issues, including reforms, by each of the regional groups.

Three characteristic elements of a simulation are (1) a structured situation which has been carefully prepared, (2) the game, whether competitive or not, and (3) the critique of the process (see Tansey and Unwin, 1969: 22). Charles Hermann has written about simulations as being amenable to computer analysis. Applying his criteria to this simulation, it might more accurately be called a "simulation game" (Nesbitt, 1971: 11-12).

The Electoral College simulation is most relevant to "American Politics" classes as well as to courses on "the Presidency" and "Elections". Although its applications have been future-oriented, history professors could use it to replicate specific previous national elections. Such exercises could prove of high interest in relation to some of the controversial, hairbreadth years.

There are several ways in which this simulation most clearly employs the teaching/learning approach (Chapman and Cousins, 1974: 65-66).

Role play tends to be open-ended, especially in its longer applications, with no limit within regions on selecting leaders or procedures for casting votes. Decision-making is consequential since the votes cast regionally lead to the candidates' success. Behavior is so free that it is possible to cast votes for non-candidates, as real "faithless electors" have.

Two factors about the Electoral College simulation that have less focus on learning are information needed and payoffs. Each participant receives a one-page Electoral College fact sheet (see Appendix). Those students who want to dig into complexities of the process, however, have many possible sources (see, e.g., Szekely, 1970). On payoffs, the emphasis is on simple quantification: does a candidate receive 270 votes? The open-ended, bargaining possibilities allow, though, for discussion of benefits to be received from choosing one candidate instead of another, as well as using strategy to form a successful coalition.

Findings in 1980 and 1984

The twenty-question debriefing questionnaire gives hints about what occurred in the learning process. It provides indications about facts retained in addition to standard identifiers and attitudinal questions. The results were encouraging in both years.

In 1980, the simulation classes had at least four questions answered correctly by 75 percent or more of their members. In 1984, on four questions, over 90 percent of the students had correct answers.

Even though the actual Electoral College meets in fifty-one different places (the state capitals and Washington, D.C.), the simulation is structured into only four voting places for two purposes:

to have manageable size and to reflect actual regional orientations. Significant change in regional power occurred from 1980 to 1984, with the West and South gaining 17 electoral votes, while the Midwest and Northeast were losing 17 electoral votes. Whereas in 1980, the Midwest and Northeast could have combined for 283 votes and a win, in 1984 they would have fallen short by four votes. In contrast, the West and South could have won by two votes in 1984, whereas they would have lost by fifteen votes in 1980. The South has become a pivotal region, able to manipulate a win by combining with any other region.[3]

The changed status of electoral votes in twenty-two states from 1980 to 1984 did not change the predictive value of the simulations. In both experiments, Ronald Reagan was the clear winner.

This finding was of special interest in October, 1980, when Newsweek and Time were unable to predict the winner. The simulation students projected margins for Reagan over Jimmy Carter of 307 to 228 and 292 to 246, even with a tendency to discount Reagan's 121-17 success in the Northeast. In 1984, Reagan won with 331 and 459 votes in the fall simulations.

Three operational innovations in 1984 were: (1) a bi-state process (using colleges in Indiana and Kentucky), (2) an election cycle process (occurring in April, July, and October), and (3) a ballot process (drawing students from non-political science courses).[4] The election cycle was geared to the primary season (when ballot groups favored Gary Hart for the Democratic Party nomination), the national conventions (when Kentucky students threw the election into the House of Representatives), and the general election campaign.

Projected Methodology for 1988

For simulations in 1988, we would like to select 102 colleges and universities (two for each state and Washington, D.C.) to participate during each of the three election seasons. In order for the nationwide experiment to be successful, we anticipate a trial run during spring, 1987 at twenty colleges and universities (five per region in the West, the Midwest, the South, and the Northeast). Based on our findings from the trial run, we will make modifications so that the 1988 simulations can be as meaningful as possible.

We are giving consideration now to criteria for selection of campuses and courses. On campuses, should we focus on location, including a state capital university for each state, or should we focus on type, such as state plus private or two-year plus four-year? On simulations, should they all be in political science courses, or should they be conducted also in history and sociology courses? On ballots, should there be a mixture of choices or specific ones like psychology and data processing? We would welcome input on these questions.

When conducting simulations during primary and convention seasons, several feasible tickets can be considered. This could necessitate several simulation runs per campus. Efforts for the general election simulations should be coordinated nationwide so that results can be transmitted to the mass media. We will evaluate data using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. We will also compare open-ended evaluative responses in an effort to improve our understanding of the relationship between experimentation and education.

NOTES

1 I am grateful to economics instructor George Berger for his explanation of the 3/2 power.

2 The simulation was created and conducted with my wife, Sandra P. Barber.

3 This is a theoretical viewpoint. No region is apt to cast all electoral votes for the same candidate.

4 Sandra P. Barber and Sandra M. Singer coordinated these applications.

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APPENDIX

The 1988 Electoral College: A Fact Sheet

What is it? A group of 538 men and women who elect the President and Vice-President of the United States.

Where does it meet? In 51 different cities: the 50 state capitals plus Washington, D.C.

When does it meet? On December 19, 1988 (Monday after the second Wednesday).

How many votes does a state have? Anywhere from three (six states + D.C.) up to 47 (California). Membership is based on Congressional representation, so it changes after every ten-year census.

Who goes to cast votes? Those people representing the party receiving the highest vote total on November 8, 1988 (Tuesday after the first Monday). It is a winner-take-all phenomenon. Two times (1876 with Hayes and 1888 with Harrison) the popular vote winner lost in the Electoral College.

Can an elector go against the pack? Yes. In several years, there have been "faithless electors". In 1976, e.g. Ford elector Mike Padden voted for Reagan.

How many votes are needed to win? 270

What happens if no candidate receives 270 votes? Then the Presidential election goes to the House of Representatives, where each state has one vote. The winner must get at least 26 votes. This has happened two times: 1800 (Jefferson won) and 1824 (J. Q. Adams won, even though Jackson had won a 99 to 84 plurality of the electoral votes). The Vice-President needs 51 Senate votes.

When will the votes be counted? on January 6, 1989, when the Vice-President will announce results to a joint session of Congress.